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# FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY WITHIN THE MDC AND THE FUTURE OF MISSOURI'S NATIVE SMALLMOUTH BASS

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The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) stands as a national beacon of conservation success, largely due to its unique and robust funding structure. However, the prestige of Missouri's smallmouth bass streams is currently at a crossroads. As fishing pressure increases and environmental stressors mount, the necessity for a total harvest ban on native smallmouth bass has become an essential conversation for long-term sustainability. This urgency is validated by the MDC's 2026 Prospect Reports, which reveal that fall 2025 sampling in Huzzah Creek and the Meramec River showed smallmouth bass were "less abundant than in other years" due to the cumulative toll of extreme flooding and low water stressors. While critics often point to potential fiscal strain, an analysis of the MDC's financial health reveals that the department possesses more than enough fiscal ability to implement and enforce such a mandate. By leveraging a record high \$180 million in projected sales tax revenue, as laid out MDC FY 2026 Internal Expenditure Plan (IEP) (July 2025), and optimizing internal expenditures away from administrative overhead, the MDC can transition the native smallmouth bass from a harvested resource to a protected, world class economic engine.

Constitutional funding provides the MDC with a unique level of independence, isolating its conservation strategies from the unpredictable nature of legislative general revenue budget allocations. According to the MDC Fiscal Year 2026 Program Book (October 2024), the agency receives \$0.00 from the State's General Revenue Fund. Instead, it is primarily supported by a dedicated one-eighth of one percent (0.125%) state sales tax. As detailed in the MDC FY 2026 IEP (July 2025), the sales tax remains the agency's dominant engine, projected to reach \$180,213,722 for fiscal year 2026, a 61.7% share of total revenue. This represents a steady climb from previous years. For instance, the MDC FY 2026 Program Book notes that sales tax growth in FY 2024 was 7.3%, bringing in \$11.6 million more than the prior year. Below is a breakdown of the MDC's FY26 projected revenue.

- | Revenue Source | Projected Amount Collected | % of Total |
  - | Conservation Sales Tax | \$180,213,722 | 61.7% |
  - | Permit Sales | \$47,635,974 | 16.3% |
  - | Federal Reimbursements | \$45,262,674 | 15.5% |
  - | Sales, Rentals, and Interest | \$9,463,560 | 3.2% |
  - | Other Sources | \$9,720,700 | 3.3% |
  - | Total Anticipated | \$292,296,630 | 100% |

*Source: MDC FY 2026 Internal Expenditure Plan, Revenue Summary Table.*

The MDC's budget is a reflection of its priorities. In the FY 2026 IEP, the total budget is \$331,396,630. Within this budget there are two categories that could provide significant funding towards smallmouth protection. The first is Conservation Business Services. This administrative pillar is budgeted at \$59,938,842 (MDC FY 2026 IEP). This exceeds the budget for the entire Protection Division (Conservation Agents), which sits at \$54,222,306. The second is New Construction. The department has allocated \$32,600,000 specifically for new construction projects in FY 2026 (MDC FY 2026 IEP, Table 18).

By applying disciplined fiscal management, such as a 2.5% reduction in Business Services and a 5% deferment of non-essential New Construction, the MDC would generate approximately \$3,128,471 in immediate enforcement capital, roughly 1% of the MDC's total budget. This pivot ensures that the front line of conservation is as well funded as the administrative support. With the \$3.1 million reallocated from Business Services and New Construction, the MDC can modernize its enforcement. According to the MDC FY 2026 IEP, the average annual cost to employ a conservation agent after factoring in salary, benefits, and operational costs such as patrol vehicles, fuel, uniforms, specialized gear, boat maintenance, etc. is roughly \$124,000. Given the annual cost of a single conservation agent, the MDC should hire fifteen additional conservation agents specifically tasked with enforcing fishing regulations, the smallmouth harvest ban in particular. These fifteen agents would cost approximately \$1,860,000 annually to employ, accounting for roughly 60% of the reallocated funds.

These new conservation agents will each need to be equipped with an MDC issued jet boat (approx. \$55,000/boat) to be able to patrol our waters, making sure these regulations are enforced. Purchasing fifteen new jet boats will cost roughly \$825,000 (approx. 26% of reallocated funds). Modern innovative field technology like thermal imaging drones (approx. \$15,000/unit) would allow these new agents to monitor regulation violations on vulnerable spawning beds and winter holds with high precision. Purchasing fifteen of these drones (1 per new agent) would cost roughly \$225,000 (approx. 7% of reallocated funds). In total, hiring fifteen new agents and equipping them with their own jet boat and thermal imaging drone would cost approximately \$2,910,000, or roughly 93% of the reallocated funds. Of the remaining 7% of available funds, The MDC should allocate 5% to new boat and drone maintenance and 2% to education and outreach about the new harvest ban. Furthermore, a total harvest ban simplifies the legal burden placed upon these new agents. As noted in the MDC Meramec River Prospect Report (2026), current regulations often require complex length limit checks. A ban removes this gray area, allowing these conservation agents to perform their duties with greater efficiency and fewer technical disputes.

According to the MDC FY 2026 Program Book, Missouri's \$19 billion outdoor economy is a massive financial engine, supporting 85,000 jobs through a ripple effect of spending on gear, travel, and local hospitality. Within this portfolio, the smallmouth bass acts as a high-value asset. As a premier destination species, it draws high spending tourists to the Ozark region. By protecting these fish and their pristine habitats, the state isn't just practicing conservation, it is securing a high-yield investment that anchors rural economies and ensures a steady return on Missouri's natural capital.

A common misconception is that a total harvest ban would lead to a decline in fishing permit revenue. Many anglers view fishing permits as a license to harvest. For those who fish primarily to put food on the table, the ability to take fish home is the primary value of the permit. If they are legally barred from keeping their catch, they may feel the permit is no longer worth the cost and choose not to renew it, leading to a direct drop in sales. However, according to the MDC Fiscal year 2025 budget summary, all permit sales (hunting and fishing combined) only make up about 17% of the budget. This means that even a significant shift in a specific niche, like smallmouth harvest, poses virtually no risk to the overall stability of the state's conservation efforts.

The fiscal ability of the MDC is beyond reproach. With a budget representing less than 1% of the state's total spending but supporting an industry responsible for 85,000 jobs, the department has every reason to protect its most valuable biological assets. If the MDC chooses to pivot from administrative overhead toward the strategic use of its record \$180 million in projected revenue, it can transform the native smallmouth bass from a simple catch into a protected, world class catalyst for regional prosperity.

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